

Accession Number: 5  
Classification: Black Community  
Date: May 4, 1974  
Place: Evanston, Illinois  
Interview with: Edna White Summers Barbara Teising was present  
Interviewed by: Thandie Mvusi assisted by Glenna Johnson  
Language Used: English  
Observations: This interview was conducted in Mrs. Summers' home. Mrs. Summers was in a very bad mood that day and the interview was continually disrupted by family and neighbors walking through the house. Her dog barked a good deal of the time. The interview was conducted almost entirely by Thandie Mvusi.

Edna White Summers: Why do you want to talk to me? There have been books written on Evanston, such as This Is Evanston.

Glenna Johnson: We aren't allowed to use anyone else's information. This is a project in which we are to go out and interview people in order to accumulate our own material. What anyone else has done is nice but we can't use it. It's called oral history.

Thandie Mvusi: The purpose of this project for us is to practice writing history based on oral sources as opposed to written sources.

Edna White Summers: Well proceed. But I may decide not to answer any of your questions. I don't mean to be arbitrary but I've decided that when you get to 54 years old you do pretty much what you want to do and you don't worry much about anybody else. You don't have time to waste. Each moment at 54 is precious. OK?

1. Q. When were you born? 1920?

A. 1919.

2. Q. On Jackson Street? Right here in Evanston?

A. That's right.

3. Q. And at that time where did your father work?

A. For the city. The city of Evanston.

4. Q. He was driving a truck?

A. That's right.

5. Q. Did your mother work?

A. Well, she worked a little during World War II, but she

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was a woman who believed fundamentally that women should not work. She believed that it was a man's job to support his family. Now that I'm 54, I believe that it is the best possible philosophy.

6. Q. But you said earlier that you thought people should do something besides clean house?

A. Well, now that I'm 54 I believe that it's time to clean my house.

7. Q. How many children did your mother have?

A. Six. Actually seven, but one died. Actually two died but one died very young, about three, the other about 1963.

8. Q. And your parents migrated from South Carolina?

A. Yeah, when they were young, because they went to school here.

9. Q. Do you know why they came to Evanston? Why they left South Carolina?

A. No. I don't know, because actually it was the grandparents who came and brought them. My grandfather, old man Sam White, and his wife brought their children North, very young five or six of them. My father and uncle were still in their baby dresses. I imagine at that time, they probably came for employment, for opportunity. As a matter of fact, in the history of Evanston, as it has been told to me, there was a period of time where black people were recruited to come to Evanston. At that time, Evanston was kind of a bedroom community from what I understand, and they needed domestic help. The thing is that I don't remember my grandmother working either, my Grandmother White, working. Sam White, old man Sam got a job working for the city. I don't







remember my grandmother working either, but then I knew her when she was a grandmother. So apparently they did not fit the usual mold because they did not do domestic work. My grnadfather worked fof the city and how that happened I don't know. OK? No my grandmother McCoy, Hannah was married to old man Peter McCoy. Who was my Mother's father. My grandmother left him in the South and came. Her first stop was Dayton, Ohio. She lived in the home of the poet. Any, wome famous black poet. She lived in his home. How she got there I don't even know. The only thing and this is only pure supposition because I don't remember asking her---I don't think kids ever ask these sort of questions. My grandmother McCoy, Hannah, left her husband but she had some older children, she had been married. She was very short, very fat and very fair and she was very proud of the fact that she was a house nigger. She was very proud of that, that she was raised in the big house and had very fine manners. She married three times and each husband was excellent to her. Her first two husbands were really excellent to her. She was bery proud of being short and fat because it showed that whe was well taken care of. OK? And, but somehow old man Peter McCoy whom she married in her later years because my Mother's sisters were quite a bit older than she. So I have a feeling that one of her sisters who had left home earlier probably sent for her, my grandmother and my mother. I don't really know, because I never questioned. It didn't occur to

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me to question and if it was ever said, I don't remember. But anyway, she stopped in Dayton and lived there for awhile and then came to Evanston. But as I said I don't know why or how except that a lot of people who live in Evanston came from South Carolina. Some come from Texas and oither places but a lot of people came here from South Carolina. Now the one thing I want to say about Grandma Hannah McCoy is that Grandma Hannah McCoy came originally from Charleston adn was quite proud that she was a Charleston lady, and she wasn't quite like some of those other folks. So how they got here I don't know but it did happen. And that my father and his brothers and sisters and my mother went to school here and they met here and married. Here is a picture of Hannah McCoy. I don't keep pictures but I just happen to have one of Hannah McCoy. She was very fair, very short, and was born a slave. My Grandmother McCoy was older than the Whites, Sam and Alice. My Mother was, all my life I remember hearing that my Mother was a change of life baby, and I never knew what that meant for years. What that meant. Ha! I really was kind of slow.

10. Q. Granmother White, or the Whites, didn't fit the mold because they didn't do domestic work, that Evanston was a bedroom community? What does that mean?

A. That means, I understand, that in the past black people were brought to Evanston to be house servants for the wealthy white people in this community. Originally, I understand. But basically knowing the history of America and Illinois, I imagine that originally there were some black people here anyway.







There just may not be any record of them but they were here. I'm sure they were here, running around with the Indians.

11. Q. Of course DeSable was in Chicago...

A. Evanston was here then. As a matter of fact, I believe, I was in a discussion the other day that Evanston was founded around the same time or before because of the University. Because originally Evanston was quite a port for shipping you know, down the lake. So I imagine there were some black folks running around here.

12. Q. Excuse me. On your information that black folks were brought to Evanston primarily to be house servants, do you recall how you got that information? Was it something you read or that people told you?

A. Well--part of it something that people have said but I believe that it is part of This Is Evanston or that report Evanston 65, but is generally passed along information. There were probably black people here with the original explorers. One thing the histories leave out is that Evanston for a long time was very restrictive and did not allow Jews in. I only realized this later as an adult. I should have known it but I didn't know it. There were like two or three families of Jews. I should have known it. I remember when I went to Haven, I was thirteen and I went to Haven, there was a girl in my class named Lela. She came into the class after school had started. And I remember the kids always made a difference with Lela and I didn't know why they made a difference--- and this is in retrospect that I know why---there was always a difference with







Lela, always a difference in how she was treated by the teacher and the kids but because there was also a difference in the way black kids were treated too, but I didn't see the relationship at that time. When I went to college my first year, I went to what is now Roosevelt University but at that time it was part of the original YMCA for blacks. When I enrolled for class and went in September, one day I walked into class and nobody except one or two students were there. It was disconcerting because I sometimes get times mixed up etc., and they said it was a Jewish holiday. Now mind you that I was eighteen years old so you can see what a closed community this was. In 1956 I moved to Chicago and moved into an area that was still white. I got a lecture about being the first black to move into the building and what was expected in terms of my behavior and I guess that same night I met a white neighbor, Italians, and in my own ignorance thought these gangsters were going to kill us. But my neighbor who was white came over to greet me. She is the one who told me that she had tried to live in Evanston many years ago and that they would not allow a Jewish couple to move in. Then the bells rang and I understood why I had never known about a Jewish holiday and that's how come the fight for separation between religion and education was such a strong issue. But I was an adult before I realized all this.

During World War II and after World War II, 99 per cent of Southeast Evanston became Jewish and it wasn't until they were already there that they realized that they had been directed there.







I tell white people at teacher's meetings etc., that black people lived all over Evanston before they did, that they were near Willard School area, the Orrington School area, the Lincolnwood School area; many black people and later were squeezed (emphatic) out. There are two major concerns that I have---one is the city discrimination against Blacks. My father worked for the city and my grandfather worked for the city in menial capacities and that is still practically the only capacities in which blacks can work for the city. The changes are coming, but very slowly.

13. Q. When were the squeezes put on these communities to squeeze them out?

A. It's come through the years. My second bias, if you will let me come to this, is zoning, institutional displacement of black people, and zoning is the most dangerous thing for people whether black or white and because it is the kind of thing that controls people, population growth, and direction and until people know that and look at zoning for what it is, it is going to keep happening and happening/ Besides it is the greatest area for crookedness.

14. Q. This is an area that really interests me. Can you tell me about the zoning processes that may or may not have gone on when Weiboldt's and Marshall Fields moved in? Were black people involved in the zoning decisions?

A. No. And they are not involved now. In the first place, zoning is not the kind of concept most people see, and that's not racial. They don't see it. "It doesn't affect me," So they







don't see it until the day that somebody comes and buys you out--- moves you out. As I say, this is not a racial thing; it can be a racial thing but it is not necessarily a racial thing.

15. Q. I was looking at the picture of Grandma Hannah McCoy and her hair brought some questions to mind. The natural is something that has come back in the last few years and mother who is in her sixties, went through many changes to make sure that her hair was not natural. Do you know anything about the values of people working for the big house and about such things?

A. If you go over to the Church of God, that's where many of the old folks are, if I go there, I say I am Sister Hannah McCoy's granddaughter---Not Edna White of Edna Summers. The old old friends of my Mother and Grandmother relate to Hannah McCoy. So what is your question about her hair?

16. Q. Do you know that having been proud of being a drvant in the big house, that she attached, in terms of complexional distinctions, great value?

A. She attached a great deal to who she was and was very proud of who she was always. As a matter of fact, yes she did. I don't know; we never talked about those kinds of things. But she was very proud of how she was and the way she looked and where she came from and the kinds of things she believed in. For instance, my Grandmother would say that she didn't believe in superstition---that was ignorance and sinful. She was a religious woman. She never pressed her hair that I can remember but then perhaps she predated the straightening comb.

You know these kids braid their hair these days in corn rows. Growing up we never wore corn rows although I grew up in a period  
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when Evanston was experiencing a very heavy growth of immigrants--- during the time when people were coming into Evanston---the 1920's. We did not wear corn rows. My Grandmother did not wear corn rows. My Mother, I believe, did not know how to corn row. And the girls who wore corn rows were country kids. Kids who came from the South. When I was growing up I always felt apologetic. I say now "the country" but in those days I would not have dared to say that because the country girls were always saying, you think you're too good because you live in the city, or, you always try to talk like white folks, and that sort of thing. So I was constantly being apologetic about what I was. In fact my daughter, just not too long ago, went through the same thing because she does not speak the so-called "black dialect."

As a child I felt very defensive. For instance, we only moved once in my life. When I was seven we moved to Hartrey. During the depression life was hard. We always had relatives moving in and out. Mother would cook in the basement and we all ate down there---there were so many people in the house most of the time. We as children thought it was great fun. As a child I didn't understand why our relatives lived with us. I didn't know that they had lost their jobs, their apartments, their homes and were staying with us until something turned up. I only knew this as an adult and it was good. In school each Monday the teacher would ask if anyone had a new address. Some kids had a different address practically every week. I was so envious. I wished so badly that we could move too. Of course, I didn't understand.

(Cont. 5/x)







Great store was placed upon property, ownership of property, that is. I didn't know what property meant. We never knew that it was an act of charity that our house was open for others. Mother never mentioned that we had property. We were never informed of what we later saw as our status. I didn't realize that we were special because our mother was not a domestic. Many Evanston women did domestic work. In hard times, that was all that was available. In my growing up days it was not unusual for women not to work. It wasn't until World War II that women moved into other sectors of the economic community. People who did domestic work did not want their children to do the same. They picked up the values of the house in which they worked. If I introduced you to Mrs. Terry or Mrs. Bobo who did domestic work, you would meet two ladies who are highly motivated to prevent their children from having to do domestic work. The children of women who have done domestic work have been highly motivated for education whereas those whose parents did office work and the so-called better jobs are doing nothing. Father worked for the city and made very little money. Mother would send us to the store for  $\frac{1}{2}$  pound of butter not a stick of margarine. We bought loin chops but we'd only get a  $\frac{1}{2}$  chop a piece. We also got Calumet Baking Powder and Domino Sugar. We might only be able to afford a pound but we got the best. The people on relief were actually in much better shape than we were. They got fresh oranges, gallons of milk, frozen veal---

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quantities and quantities of it. Mrs. White, they'd say, we're gonna give some of our milk to you. The people on relief shared with us and we shared with our friends. People on relief always helped us out because we were poorer than they. We grew up on quick Quaker Oats and Carnation milk. When Dad got paid, Mom would say, now what do you want for a treat today. We would say conrflakes and real milk.

17. Q. What was the basis for social stratification within the black community.

A. In years back, as I remember it, the chauffeurs and the maids were the elites and of course the property owners.

18.Q.What were the highest paying jobs blacks could get?

A. I really don't know. Remember, we always had professional people, doctors, murses, and teachers---though teachers were not allowed to teach in Evanston. Opportunities were not and are not the best here.

(Bob White who has just entered the room interjects: I had three black teachers at Foster when I was there. That must have been in '41.)

A. (Edna) There were no black teachers when I was there. Even when they did hire black teachers they recruited outside the Evanston community. Evanston, not only the University, never looked after its own.

19. Q. Do you know why?

A. I don't know why that is. It's something I've always personally resented. Evanston has been a stepping stone for a lot of black people without fundamentally changing the quality







of life for black people in Evanston. Getting black teachers was not easy. The real push for black teachers began about five years ago. They hired from the outside instead of hiring Evanston's ~~black~~ black teachers who had been forced to seek jobs in Chicago earlier. People who could have helped the black school took their children out of the black schools. Foster was originally a white school. When people began to talk about quality education, the integration question got mixed up in it. Black folks can't hide anymore---that's been the only good thing to come out of school integration. It has brought about unity. Someday black people are going to get together and someday people will say my kid---our kids---are getting shafted. I think I have noticed a change in language patterns of children. I think it is a positive thing because language is a communication tool as well as a communication problem. Because children have had problems talking to the powers that be. One has to survive within the system.

End of Session



